SYMPOSIUM: POPULISMS IN THE WORLD-SYSTEM

Gendering the New Right-Wing Populisms:
A Research Note

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Abstract

Populism has become the subject of a large and growing literature but little is written about non-Western movements, and feminist scholars have yet to grapple with its gender dynamics, including its appeal to many women voters, and its gendered social consequences. In this research note, I briefly survey the literature and show how right-wing populist nationalism – a reaction to the ills of neoliberal capitalist globalization – is also found in Islamist movements. I call for an inclusive, progressive agenda that can appeal to and mobilize those who have been left behind.

Keywords: Islamist movements, gender

Is the specter of populism haunting the contemporary world? The sheer number of publications on the subject since at least 2016 suggests its topicality and urgency.[1] Most studies focus on the rise of right-wing radical populist parties and movements, although left-wing populist movements and parties also have erupted. Populism is not new, given its long history in Russia and the United States, and the deployment of populist rhetoric and policies of various ideological hues in Latin America and Europe. Like nationalism, populism favors "the people," and like populism, nationalism comes in left-wing and right-wing varieties, with some feminists making the case for a "feminist nationalism" (West 1997). If earlier episodes of populism, often tinged with nativism, emerged from the contradictions of the transition from traditional to modern society during the early industrial era (e.g., displacements and exploitation), the current wave appears to be a backlash against the contradictions of neoliberal globalization (e.g., unemployment, free trade, growing income inequalities, austerity).

It is worth noting that although leftists and feminists were among the earliest critics of neoliberal globalization, the far right has now joined the chorus. For right-wing populists and nationalists, free trade, open borders, "unbridled" immigration, multicultural policies, refugees, and liberal values have brought down wages and resulted in culture clashes. The answer lies in a retreat to nationalism, protectionism, secure borders, and traditional values, often rooted in a religious frame. For those on the left, the ills of neoliberal capitalist globalization—which include cuts to public services, new employment contracts enabling precarious forms of employment, female unemployment, and rising costs of living—call for a return to a robust social democracy (if not a socialist democracy), informed by feminist values and gender equality.

Much of the commentary on contemporary populism focuses on Europe and the United States. Armin Schafer, in writing about the Western democracies, states that "right-wing parties mobilize 'angry white men' who believe the elites do not care about them and who deeply mistrust establishment parties" (Schafer 2017: 1). And yet, right-wing populism, or right-wing populist nationalism, has been afflicting non-Western democracies as well, encompassing Islamist parties and movements in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and North Africa (see Taşkin 2008 on Turkey), and the Hindu right in India (Bose 2017; Mazumdar 1994). As such, right-wing parties and movements also mobilize "angry brown men."

In most cases, contemporary right-wing populist and nationalist movements and parties constitute a gendered backlash to the ills of neoliberal capitalist globalization and its attendant values. Common features include dissatisfaction with the status quo, establishment parties, the media, and elites; a suspicion of external influences and preference for the nation-state; hostility

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[1] See, for example, Galston 2017; Goodhart 2017; Judis 2016; Mitchell and Fazi 2017; Mounk 2018; Pinera, Rhodes-Purdy and Rosenblatt 2016; Rodrik 2017.

toward—or at the least, suspicion of—minorities, immigrants, and refugees; and recourse to traditional values and conservative social norms, often justified in religious terms but also in secular, civic or cultural terms. Leaders and founders are mostly men and their discourses and tactics often evince a problematical form of hyper-masculinity. Their notions of femininity are traditional and would strike many feminists as downright dangerous, but such notions do resonate with a certain section of the female population.

This research note is based on a paper prepared for the annual conference of the Global Studies Association (Howard University, Washington DC, 6-8 June 2018), co-authored with Northeastern University graduate student Gizem Kaftan. The four case studies analyzed in the larger paper—Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and the United States—reveal that right-wing populists use democracy to come to power but then deploy seemingly anti-democratic rhetoric and policies. This suggests not only that neoliberal globalization has produced a critical mass of disaffected voters and politicians, but that representative democracy itself appears to be in crisis, inasmuch as it has been unwilling or unable to tackle the problems that have given rise to the backlash.

Populism and Nationalism North and South

Approaches to the study and definition of populism vary, and in some accounts a populist uprising or movement may consist of "the people" in a broad cross-class coalition against elites. Such an approach appears in some analyses of the 1978-79 Iranian revolution against the Shah and his regime (Abrahamian 1993; Moghadam 1993). Others note the rise of populist movements during periods of political polarization, leading to an "us versus them" approach to grievances and mobilizations (Laclau 2005; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Populist leaders appeal to "the people," "the real people," "the silent majority," and similar terms. Ionescu and Gellner (1969) discuss cases from Russia and the United States (farmers' movements in the late 19th century), Latin America (e.g., Peronism), Eastern Europe, and Africa. These and more recent populist movements and parties may be left-wing (e.g., the Latin American "pink tide" of the first decade of the 21st century) or right-wing (the anti-immigrant and anti-globalization movements and parties in contemporary Europe). Aytac and Öniş (2014) compare and contrast the left-wing populism of the Kirchners in Argentina with the right-wing populism of Erdogan in Turkey. In one overview of the literature, populism appears as an ideology, a discursive style, and a political strategy (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). For Margaret Canovan (1999: 3), populism is "an appeal to the people against both the established structure and the dominant ideas and values of the society."

With a focus on Britain, Goodhart (2017) argues that populism is an understandable reaction to liberal overreach. In contrast to the "anywheres" with their portable identities and wealth, the "somewheres" have been left behind by global capitalism, economically but mainly in terms of

respect for the things they cherish.[2] As Judis (2016) has noted, technocratic elites lost much of their credibility in the global financial crisis of 2008. The EU has damaged its claim to be a guardian of democracy by repeatedly ignoring referendums in which voters rejected new treaties, and just 41% of citizens trust the EU[3] (The Economist 2018: 12). In many Western states, established elites—along with their organized lobbies and institutions—have ignored the democratic will of the majority, and people's frustration with the limits of liberal democracy has been exacerbated by economic difficulties. Gregor Gysi, the leader of the left-wing Die Linke party, which has been kept out of German coalitions, attributes the surge of right-wing populism in the East to former East Germans viewing themselves as the "losers of history" and then "like second-class Germans" after reunification (Connelly 2017: 4). Pinero, Rhodes-Purdy and Rosenblatt (2016) show how populist leaders in Latin America have activated popular latent grievances against socio-economic exclusion and inequality.[4]

In one study of Turkey (Dincsahin 2012: 625), populism arises as "an alternative movement that may become a remedy to [people's] unfulfilled demands during times of crisis.… Populist politicians [then] set up an imaginary unity among the people and present institutional inability as a scapegoat to be blamed for the unmet demands of the people." The use of "the people" in populism ties it to some extent to the deployment of "the people" and "the nation" in nationalist movements and parties. Both populist and nationalist rhetoric tend to be nativist and exclusionary, reflected in the slogan "own people first" (Muis and Immerzeel 2017: 910).

Whereas feminist scholarship on populism is sparse, it is fairly prodigious on nationalism. Studies have theorized and documented the centrality of women, gender, and the female body to the implementation of nationalist goals of modernity or secularism or anti-colonialism (Jayawardena 1986; Moghadam 1994; Yuval-Davis 1997). But this centrality has been alternately positive and negative for women's participation and rights, and for their full citizenship.[5]

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[2] The book's title echoes a famous 2016 speech by British Prime Minister Theresa May, who attacked "citizens of nowhere" who "find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal, your attachment to your job security inconvenient."

[3] Elsewhere, the journal noted that in 2013, "the Dutch populists keenly supported a law enabling any piece of primary legislation to be put directly to the country's 12.9m voters if 300,000 of them demanded it" (p. 19).

[4] In contrast, Langman (forthcoming) focuses on the *ressentiment* of Donald Trump voters, arguing that "people mobilize on the basis of feelings and images, not facts or policies," and that "a great deal of the white nationalist/right populist mobilization for DT was a reaction to the more progressive trend…" that had been occurring in the United States.

[5] On Egypt, see Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and the Nation* (Princeton University Press, 1995), and Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); on Iran see Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); on Turkey see Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women and the Turkish State: Political Actors or Symbolic Pawns?" in Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, eds., *Women-Nation-State*

Jayawardena described the compatibility of and synergy between nationalist movements and feminist aspirations in the nineteenth and early 20th centuries, with a focus on Asia. Indeed, the term "the woman question" was coined in reference to struggles for women's rights in the context of socialist, independence and nationalist movements in the first half of the twentieth century. I have argued (Moghadam 2008) that tensions between feminism and nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) arose later in the 20th century and into the new millennium, the result of the new religio-nationalist movements that saw the nation as "the family writ large" and women's roles as reproducers and socializers of model (religious or ethnic) citizens.

The rise of fundamentalist Islamist movements and parties in MENA, which associated "woman" with family and morality, sought to strengthen or introduce Sharia laws and norms, and regarded feminism and socialism as alien ideologies (Kandiyoti 1991; Moghadam 1994). At the same time, Islamist movements had no quarrel with capitalism or even its neoliberal version, which is why they should be designated as right-wing (Moghadam 2013). Nonetheless, the compatibility of feminism and nationalism that Jayawardena described for the early 20th century has its echoes in other movements, political parties, or states, such as Morocco (Moghadam 2008), Tunisia (Charrad 2001), and South Korea (Kim 2009). The recent nationalist uprisings in Scotland and Catalunya appear to have broad female and even feminist support, as does the Irish republican movement. Thus, as with populism and its varieties, nationalism may very well be versatile and varied, with left-wing and right-wing, and pro- and anti-feminist varieties.

Feminism—as both ideology and movement—similarly comes in varieties. In the early days of second wave feminism, strands were identified as Marxist, socialist, radical, cultural, and liberal. Liberal feminism arguably prevailed, especially in Western countries, but today certain feminist scholars and activists have taken issue with what they see as "neoliberal" or "imperial" strands and exemplars of feminism (Brenner 2001; Eisenstein 2009; Epstein 2009; Fraser 2009; McRobbie 2009; Roberts 2012). Despite the promise and claims of "intersectionality," much of contemporary gender studies and feminist scholarship lacks attention to the politics of class disadvantage. One might extend McRobbie's concept of "faux feminism" to pundits, politicians, professionals, and advocates who promote a form of governance based on market relations, high military spending, and a residual welfare state. Such "faux feminists" are unlikely to support left-wing populist movements and parties, but they also may be unlikely to support right-wing populism, preferring the established liberal political parties.

Contemporary left-wing and right-wing populisms alike are products of, and reactions to, neoliberal capitalist globalization as it has unfolded since the 1980s, although their discourses,

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(Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1989); on Palestine see Deborah Gerner, "Mobilizing Women for Nationalist Agendas", in V. M. Moghadam (ed.), *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia* (Syracuse University Press, 2007).

tactics, and solutions differ markedly. In a world where capital has been able to shop around the globe for the cheapest labor and the lowest taxes, many working people have been left behind. For populist voters, including members of the working class, decision-makers and mainstream parties care little about their interests and needs; as Schafer (2017) notes, "their anger is neither misinformed nor irrational and corresponds to a growing body of political science research, which documents how democracy is biased in favor of the better-off or even the wealthiest." For some, this means disillusionment with or rejection of mainstream parties, and support for left-wing populists. These include Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein of the U.S. Democratic and Green Parties, respectively; Jeremy Corbyn of the UK's Labour Party; Juan Iglesias of Spain's Podemos; Jean-Luc Mélanchon of France's Parti de Gauche; Gregor Gysi of Germany's Die Linke; Selahettin Demirtas of Turkey's People's Democratic Party (HDP); and Andrès Manuel López Obrador of Mexico's National Regeneration Movement. Such political leaders, of course, do not appeal to right-wing voters, and very likely not to most self-defined liberals, either.

In Europe, the United States, and Australia, galvanizing issues are immigration, refugees, integration, law and order, terrorism, economic deprivation, and the perceived loss of culture. Arlie Hochschild (2016) writes of American voters who feel dispossessed and angry about how mainstream politicians have ignored them or ridiculed their culture and religiosity. Many also see their economic woes and the end of the "American dream" tied to free trade agreements, immigration, and security concerns (Galston 2017). For those in the MENA Islamist parties and movements, galvanizing issues are the spread of liberal ideas and the perceived threats to family and religion; Western intrusions and their effects on youth, women, and government policy; and the longstanding Palestinian question (Moaddel 2002; Moghadam 2013; Wiktorowicz 2000, 2004, 2005). In the same way that Germany's Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) voters cited threats to "the German language and culture" (Garton Ash 2017), right-wing Muslims vote for Islamist parties in order to protect and preserve their culture and religion. And in the same way that many Muslims feel that Islam is under threat, right-wing populists in Poland and Hungary argue that "Christian Europe" is in danger of being overrun by Muslim immigrants and refugees who cannot or will not assimilate (Golebiowska 2017).

Women who support right-wing populist or nationalist movements and parties—such as the 53% of white American women voters who cast their ballots for Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Junn 2017; Darby 2017) or the 54 % of Turkish women who voted for Erdogan in 2011 (Bostan, 2011)—may obviously subscribe to the narratives of culture or religion in danger, but they also may be homemakers who find security in the traditional sexual division of labor. This is

no doubt true of most Islamist movements, which have many female adherents and voters.[6] Turkish scholars have found a greater propensity for homemakers to vote conservative and specifically for AKP (Bozkurt 2013; Elveren 2017; Ilkkaracan 2012, 2017). It would be interesting to investigate this further for other Islamist parties; future research should analyze sex-disaggregated data on voting patterns by employment status, education, income, and rural/urban location.

Our four case studies show that women are divided in their approach to the rightwing populist parties that have come to the fore and won elections across the globe. In the same way that Islamist parties throughout the Muslim world have drawn on anxieties about liberal Western values and a perceived threat to Islam and Muslims by Western policies as well as wars and occupations, the right-wing populist and nationalist parties and movements of Europe and the United States bank on their members' and supporters' anxieties about perceived threats to Christian, European, or American values and security by foreigners, mainly Muslims. Among them, right-wing women find solace in religion, family, and the nation and find feminism and foreigners inimical to their sense of identity. Hence the female votes for the AKP, PiS, Fidesz, and Trump's Republican Party. Far from creating an expansive sense of global citizenship, the era of globalization has hardened identities due to its intrinsic contradictions: a tendency toward periodic crisis, economic inequality, democracy deficits, and precarious employment conditions.

What is to be Done?

In contrast to the internationalism of the socialist and communist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries or the "sisterhood is global" values of second-wave feminism, contemporary right-wing populism is insular and almost provincial. One might even note its contrast with the universalist sentiments of the Persian mystical poets, such as Sa'adi: "Human being are members of a whole; In creation of one essence and soul; If one member is afflicted with pain; Other members uneasy will remain; If you have no sympathy for human pain, The name of human you cannot retain." And Jalaleddin Rumi: "I am neither Christian nor Jew, neither Magian [Zoroastrian] nor Muslim. I am not from East or West. My place is placeless and my trace is traceless." As someone who was born in Iran, lived and worked in various countries, is a citizen of the United States as well as Iran, has a cross-religious marriage, and is firmly rooted in the socialist left, I am more inclined to eschew identity politics and embrace global citizenship. And yet, I fully understand attachment to place and culture. In particular, I sympathize with those who have been at the receiving end of the damage that has been done by neoliberal capitalist globalization. The rise of populism reflects

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[6] Such women are different from what are referred to "Islamic feminists", who engage in a liberal and egalitarian interpretation of Islam.

anger toward the established political parties that embraced neoliberalism, and the democratic politics that seem unable or unwilling to counter its negative effects.

This raises the question of whether left-wing populist parties can mobilize enough supporters—the "precariat," working women from across social classes, and citizens who have only recently gravitated toward right-wing parties—around an agenda for full employment, social security, gender equality, a cap on CEO compensation, the protection of cultural heritage, and a welcome mat for immigrants. In the United States, "Our Revolution" has a similar agenda to reinvigorate democracy, as does the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum. The presence of women across professions and occupations, their involvement in all manner of movements, organizations, networks, and political parties, and leadership and creativity in their own organizations, movements, and networks means that women will be major players in the making of a broad progressive coalition for socio-political transformation. But for this to occur, the left-wing movements, and many feminists themselves, must seek to mobilize as broad a female base of support as possible for a new vision and set of policies to oppose patriarchy, militarism and war, and the economic injustices that afflict working-class and poor women, from the absence of decent jobs, paid maternity leave, and public transport, to the high cost of schooling, healthcare, and housing. Neither the Left nor feminism should cede the concerns of working-class women or even women with religious values to the right-wing. Valorization of motherhood through institutional supports for maternal employment and guaranteed healthcare for mothers and children is one way to start building bridges. And action against all forms of violence against women—including domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment and abuse—should continue, as the problem is shared across classes and cultures. A new feminist politics premised on cross-class solidarity at transnational, national, and local levels could contribute in significant ways to the broad goal of reclaiming states and institutions for a truly progressive era.

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